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The Last Crusaders

The biggest bestseller of the 21st century is set to be this year's most controversial blockbuster.

We meet the conspirators involved...

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In the film version, Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu find another clue in a bag of Twisties. Kidding, people.

T“But choose wisely, for while the true Grail will bring you life, the false Grail will take it from you.”

The Grail Knight, 1938

he strings are off. It's an almost imperceptible flaw in the symphonic sweep spilling through the speakers, but as far as composer Hans Zimmer is concerned, someone might as well have insulted his mother. “Damn it! Damn it!” he stutters furiously, stifling more colourful curses in respect of the polite company that occupies the control room at Air Studios in Hampstead. “Stop! Stop!” he demands into a microphone that connects him to the studio floor where the collected ranks of the London Philharmonic are toiling to match the composer's exacting standards for his latest composition – the music behind the film of the novel that has got a lot of people talking, and some, it appears, shouting. “Damn! Damn!” he snorts, again to

no one in particular. It wouldn't take a Harvard symbolist (good at shapes) to decipher that time is pressing. The film must be ready for its Cannes debut on May 19.

A break is called for, so Zimmer can have a cigarette. A perceptible sigh of relief issues from the gathering of Zimmer cronies, studio bodies, director Ron Howard, Ron Howard cronies, and a nervy-looking guy with gingery hair and one of those accountant-faces that's hard to recall later. He's introduced as Dan Brown. And there, among it all, is *Empire*, who, given the copyright case Brown is (at the time of writing) in London to defend, could be the cause of the author's current disposition – he's famously allergic to the press.

At this pregnant juncture, a weary-looking

Howard strikes out from the crowd to shake *Empire*'s hand and suggest we go somewhere quieter and farther away from the millionaire creator of Robert Langdon – hero, intellectual and symbolist – shortly to be portrayed by millionaire Tom Hanks in a much-ballyhooed \$US125 million movie adaptation.

“Dan's been popping in and out,” says Howard over his shoulder as we walk away. “While he's been here in London... He's been very supportive... He says he absolutely loves the film... Dan is a very gracious guy... I found him to be a great resource, and I wanted to be inclusive... Even though I have final cut.”

Howard stops in his tracks, as if to add emphasis to his next point: “It's my intention that the breadth of the book's entertainment value is carried over into the movie.” Even if the cold blast of controversy will blow about your “entertainment” with such gusto it would leave even a director with the foundations of Howard trembling?

But then that's what comes when you agree to adapt the most famous book in the world bar the Bible – and you might consider *The Da Vinci Code* something of a sequel to that hit thriller. Here was a novel, supposedly founded on some hotly debated notions of truth – ostensibly it's a modern-day quest for the Holy Grail – with between 40 and 60 million readers, stirring up rancour and favour in equal measure. On one »

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hand, bus tours have sprung up in its honour, teeming with tourists tracing its legend as if it were history. On the other, the Vatican enrolled one Cardinal Tarcisio to personally evaluate the novel's behaviour, and he ended up condemning it for disseminating falsehoods about a Church cover-up of Christ's blood line – more extreme voices than the Pope's emissary declared it blasphemous. Meanwhile, cabals of literary critics, envious of the sales, decided it was at worst drivel, at best a pulp thriller.

"Dan might not choose the word 'pulp'," complains Howard. "It's entertainment... Popular fiction."

Production began last US summer, and the defamations continued buzzing around them like wasps to a beer glass. There were tribulations over casting; shooting in the sacred corridors of the Louvre, a key location; shooting in Westminster Abbey, another; and finding a nun staging a one-sister demo on the doorstep of Lincoln Cathedral. Howard must have started thinking the rumours were true and that there really was a secret sect of Grail warriors protecting the sacred from the profane – or, at least, from Hollywood.

And recently, two fellow Grail scholars, Richard Leigh and Michael Baigent, accused Brown of plagiarising their book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, a "factual" work Brown openly references in the pages of his novel. They lost their case in early April, which left Sony able to open the film as planned.

"I assumed there was going to be real controversy, just as there was with the book," admits Howard, more distant rather than openly edgy as we take a seat in a small café area that feeds the studio. At 52, the Richie Cunningham-ness of his features are faded with age. "I assume there are a lot of people who wish the movie hadn't been made. I respect people of



The production filmed inside the Louvre from 10pm to 4am, but wasn't allowed to use the real *Mona Lisa*.



Tales From The Crypt

Audrey Tautou on *Da Vinci*, *Amélie* and garroting chickens...

At one end of the gallery, nestled within the heart of the Louvre, hangs the rather tiny *Mona Lisa*. At the other end hangs Veronese's vast *Wedding At Cana*. In between

these two masterpieces sits Audrey Tautou, although her delicate facial features are contorted: she's doing an impression of a chicken. It's not her most impressive piece of acting, but it's passable. "I don't think the world is that jealous of me," she beams. "I know a few of the girls that auditioned and they were happy for me; we are not like chickens cutting each other's throats."

It has been suggested that Tautou's success in securing the role of Sophie Neveu, the French cryptologist in *The Da Vinci Code*, has prompted wide-scale jealousy among those who were turned down (thought to include the likes of Julie Delpy and Sophie Marceau), and certainly playing the female lead in Ron Howard's adaptation could be seen as a career-making role; the book has sold over 50 million copies after all.

Perhaps even more surprising than these allegations, however, is that Tautou auditioned at all. The shy 27-year-old *Amélie* star has thus far eschewed big Hollywood roles (her only English-speaking part to date was in Stephen Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*) to concentrate on Gallic fare.

"With all the attention, I am more frightened than anything else," she says, "but I know also that it's going to be a very interesting experience. And while *Amélie* was a small movie, it had huge success, so I know that if you decide to stay removed from the media for a little while you can have a quietness in your life. I don't want to be a big Hollywood star."

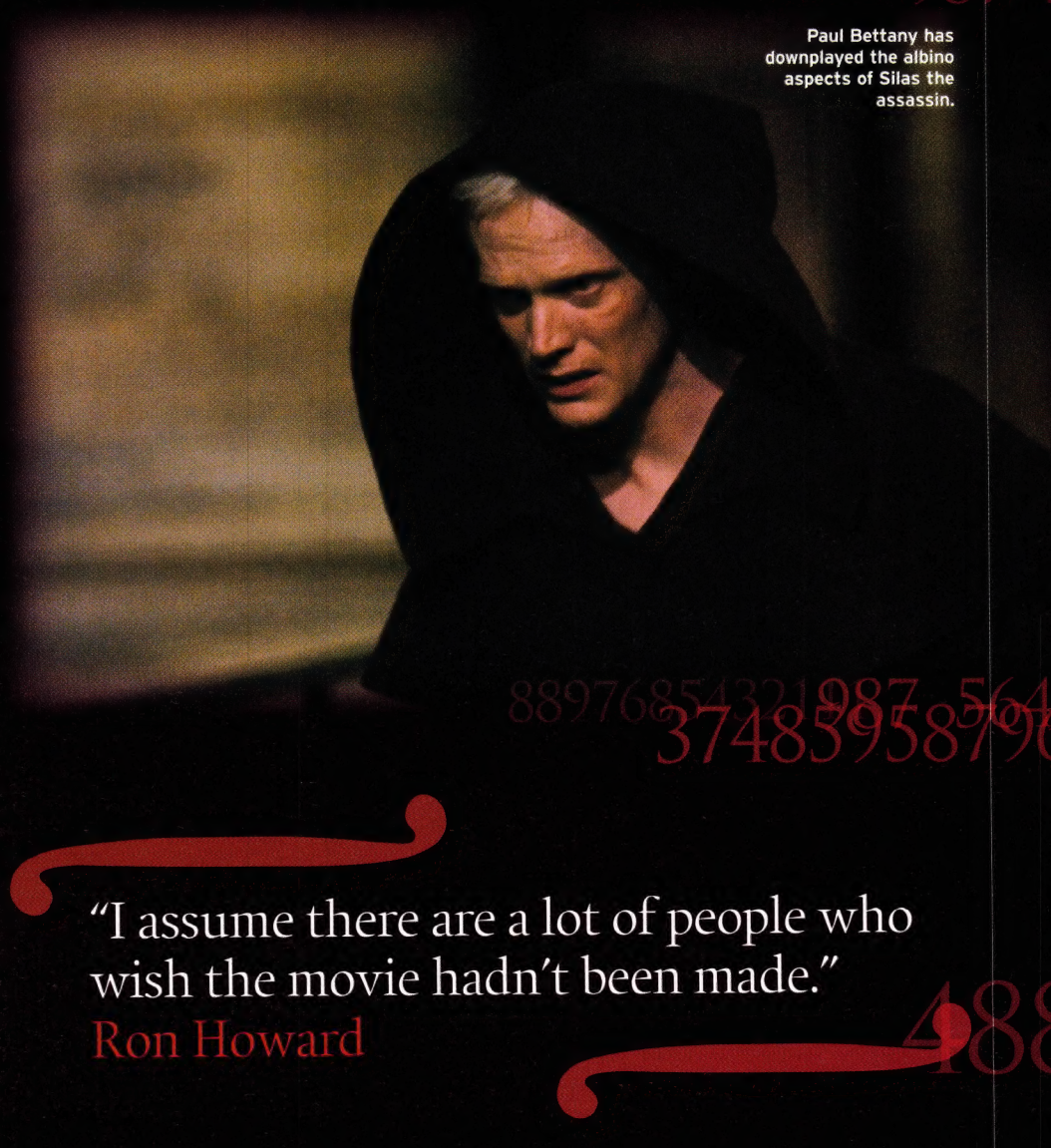
While she will attract the attention of Hollywood casting agents, what of those sections of the Catholic establishment who

disapprove of the book's ideas? "This movie is not a religious movie, it's a thriller," she demands, undaunted by any potential controversy, "and everybody should be completely aware that it is fiction. For my part, I am really not worried, nor excited, about the controversy."

But was she excited by the role? Compared with *Amélie* or *A Very Long Engagement*, Sophie's character does not appear to have any great depth. "I find Sophie's character quite deep," she counters, "and I wanted to add that depth to Sophie that you don't have in the book. That's why there are scenes in the movie that are real acting scenes, to give us that depth; the movie is still fast-paced, with lots of bang, bang, bang, but there is something very human, too."

WILL LAWRENCE

Paul Bettany has downplayed the albino aspects of Silas the assassin.



"I assume there are a lot of people who wish the movie hadn't been made."
Ron Howard

faith and devotion and their opinions. I'm not trying to provoke them. It's a work of fiction, a story. If you're not going to find it entertaining or intriguing, then you shouldn't go and upset yourself. It's not theology, but it deals with these conspiracy theories. Some people believe they are true, others don't. Who knows?"

Let's be clear. *The Da Vinci Code* is hardly knocking on Heaven's Gate. Whatever the dirt thrown by whatever fanatical party, Howard remains in charge of the most eagerly anticipated adaptation since the first *Harry Potter* film. "I wouldn't want to be another movie opening anywhere near us," boasted Sony chief Amy Pascal of her big summer hope. It could be the biggest thing in Christendom.

For now, though, the strings are off.

"The quest for the Grail is not archaeology, it's a race against evil."

Professor Henry Jones, 1938

Brian Grazer, Howard's producer-partner, thought *The Da Vinci Code* would make a good basis for the new season of 24, sending

Jack Bauer skidding round the Louvre, but Dan Brown was having none of it. His book was not yet a hit, but he held out for a fully fledged movie deal, and Sony duly stepped in with an offer that now looks like a bargain – \$US6 million for the book and any future novels featuring Langdon (helpfully, Brown's *Da Vinci* sequel, *The Solomon Key*, will also be released shortly). Then, with ironic symmetry, or, indeed, the hand of God, Sony offered it back to Grazer and Howard to make. It was a choice influenced by the book's growing notoriety. "We all knew it was controversial, and we were ready for that," said producer John Calley. "Ron is not a polariser."

But as the vanilla touch of Howard, who was so swell with *Apollo 13*, *Cinderella Man* and *A Beautiful Mind*, began to fillet the book down, to nudge its plot into a shootable form, a literary sensation was turning into a phenomenon. People who never read a book were reading it. Others were ferociously condemning its none-too original theory that Christ had been married to Mary Magdalene and sired a blood line. Brown hardly helped matters by declaring in the foreword that his notions were "accurate". Did

Howard ever feel like getting the hell out of Le Dodge, that this thing was too damn big?

"I was involved in it so deeply and committed to it on a practical level," he says. "I was aware there was suddenly this tremendous anticipation connected with the movie, but I just kept ignoring the little doubting voice. I guess I thought it was a good problem."

Did he feel pressured to soften the story, to make it more palatable to those parties liable to kick up a holy stink? Rumours abounded that he and screenwriter Akiva Goldsman were rewiring the second half of the book to fix its warped narrative and de-spike its dodgy convictions...

"The intention was to adapt the novel, and that was the goal, not to reinvent it," he retorts. "We have naturally condensed ideas. The editing is my creative decision. The actors have interpreted their characters. But I like the book. It would be ludicrous to take the edges off."

Essential to Howard's mind, and the romanticism of the story, was that he be able to shoot on location in Paris's hallowed art museum, the Louvre, home of the *Mona Lisa*, and setting for the film's elaborate opening. To »

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GET CLEVER! OR YOUR MONEY BACK...

Ignore worthless Da Vinci guides, simply regard our helpful glossary...

HOLY GRAIL

In the Christian tradition, it is the cup of Christ at the Last Supper, and the vessel that collected Christ's blood after his side was pierced by a lance at the Crucifixion. A pertinent symbol in the Arthurian legends, it is said to have been brought to Britain by Joseph Of Arimathea. Esoteric tradition traces the etymology to suggest Grail means "blood", rather than "vessel", of Christ.

KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

Religious order founded in the early 12th century to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land in the aftermath of the First Crusade. Dissolved by the Inquisition in 1308, who claimed the Templars practiced homosexuality and urinated on the image of Christ. The order helped establish the modern tradition of banking, and indeed many in medieval times described the belligerent Knights as clucking bankers... or something similar.

LEONARDO DA VINCI

Florentine painter, sculptor, draughtsman and all-round egg-head, who practised sidelines in architecture, town planning, invention, science... the list goes on. He lived from 1452 to 1519, and is most famous for painting the *Mona Lisa* in 1503. *The Da Vinci Code* author Dan Brown says he was gay; he was certainly a man of unsurpassed genius and his many notebooks, written backwards, are rife with profound scientific observation. And he had Turtle Power. Top that.

OPUS DEI

A Catholic institution founded in 1928 by Josemaría Escrivá. Its mission is to spread the message: "Work and the circumstances of everyday life are occasions for growing closer to God, for serving others, and for improving society." All of which can be achieved, apparently, with the help of corporal mortification and alienation from the family unit – unusual practices demanded by the order and, incidentally, by the editors at *Empire*... Not a Jedi.

ROSICRUCIANS

An order founded in 1407, according to a legend published in the 17th century, by a German pilgrim named Christian Rosenkreuz, who studied in the Middle East under various occult masters. The order was linked with the study of alchemy, and many cite them as the progenitors of modern Freemasonry. Also known as the Knights of the Rosy Cross – a name sure to strike fear into the hearts of... erm... gardeners?

SIR WILLIAM OF LAWRENCE

Ron Howard shaved millions off the budget with "inventive" accommodation solutions.

"I firmly believe that stimulating an audience's mind is a positive thing."
Ron Howard

many sniffy French writers this was unthinkable, an abomination in the face of some of the greatest art mankind has ever produced. Howard and Grazer made their requests and waited. Then while in Paris auditioning, they got a call from the office of French President Jacques Chirac inviting them to drop by.

"We thought it was going to be a five-minute thing, like a trip to the Oval Office – a photo and a handshake," recalls Grazer.

They ended up sitting there for an hour, they got fresh coffee, patisseries. Chirac mentioned if they couldn't land the Louvre to let him know. He also suggested they cast his daughter's best friend, an actress, in the pivotal role of Sophie Neveu – the pretty Parisian cryptologist (good with puzzles) who is the catalyst for the ensuing plot. Oh, and grant Jean Reno a pay rise. Thankfully, as Howard laughs, "That deal was closed."

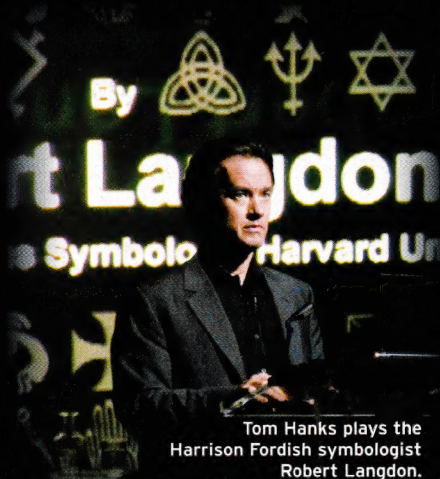
Soon enough, they had permission for a week of night-shoots in the palatial museum. It was speedy work, 10pm to 4am, then out. And

the stipulations were heavy – no blood on the floor, and no use of the real *Mona Lisa* on the basis of it being priceless. The film uses a replica. Comically, they used the room that contains the most famous painting in history as a storeroom for camera equipment. "Boxes, tools, camera stands, a disassembled crane... and the *Mona Lisa*," laughs Howard.

When it came to the casting, Presidential suggestions or not, Howard was fixed in his purpose. He turned a deaf ear to the voices clamouring for Harrison Ford as Langdon (the novel describes him as "Fordish"), and for Sophie Marceau, Juliette Binoche or Julie Delpy to play Sophie. What they got, to some consternation, was Hanks with a mullet: Howard liked the fact he, like Langdon, "wasn't a man of action". Audrey Tautou, the internet wailed, was far too cute to play harried and heartbroken. "She didn't leap to the top of my list either," admits the director, "but through the audition process she emerged as a fascinating choice."

The Pope phoned through frequent script changes. No, not really.

Director Ron Howard says the film retains the book's entertainment value.



Tom Hanks plays the Harrison Fordish symbologist Robert Langdon.



Producer Brian Grazer was relieved not to have the silliest hair on-set, for once.

The extended cast was suitably international for such a Eurocentric thriller: Sir Ian McKellen, Jean Reno, Alfred Molina and Paul Bettany as the albino monk assassin Silas – a villainous role castigated as yet another demolition job on albino sensibilities (see sidebar). Bettany had to endure hours of make-up each day to transform into this masochistic avenging angel. "I thought about his albinism as little as possible," says Bettany in his defence. "The fact that he was a monk and an assassin seemed to be the bit that was my job. It is no more a representation of an albino than it is of people who wear sandals."

With the prickly heat of France behind them, they must have thought Britain would be a breeze. But it kept on coming. The authorities at the Westminster Abbey turned them down flat, suspicious of the novel's middlebrow blasphemies. They turned to the aesthetically similar Lincoln Cathedral, only to find a nun, 61-year-old Sister Mary Michael, staging a 12-hour prayer vigil on their doorstep in protest, while pastor Bill Cairns stood outside clutching a Bible with hellfire in his eyes. The British press insisted 200 people also turned up with bullhorns, and that the sister wasn't even a real sister – she had a bad habit.

"That was funny, she was sweet," laughs Howard. "And there were 198 people outside the hotel waiting for Tom to come out and sign their books... I can tell you we have not been impeded in any way. You know, I firmly believe that stimulating an audience's mind in any area,

including the sense of what might have occurred in the past, is ultimately a positive thing and not threatening to their stability and wellbeing."

"The search for the Grail is the search for the divine in all of us."

Marcus Brody, 1938

Ron Howard was raised with basic Christian values, Presbyterian, but likes to think of himself as open-minded. "Yeah, on a spiritual level," he explains. "I'm not going to say too much about it..."

Do you have an idea where Dan Brown's religious convictions lie?

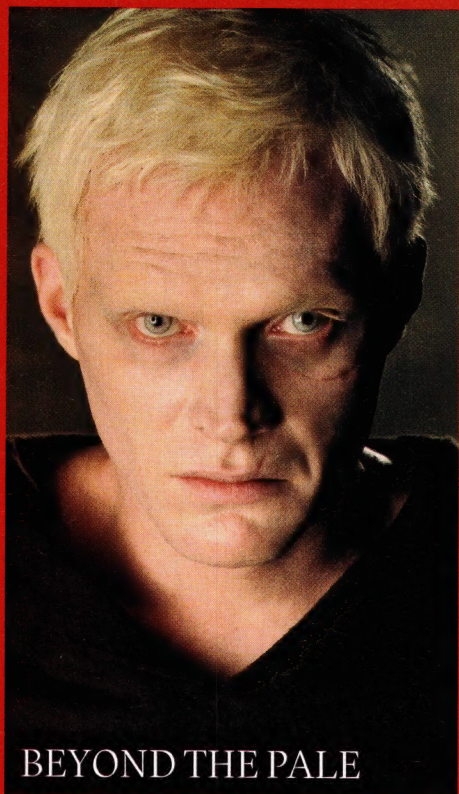
An unease re-enters Howard's voice: "Please don't quote me on Dan because we've only had handfuls of conversations. I have a lot of respect for him, but I don't really know him."

You feel that Howard wants to mark something of a divide, a point where the book stops and the film can be what it needs to be: a big-brand summer thriller flowing with Hitchcockian currents and quotable facts about art. Although the plagiarism case mounted by Leigh and Baigent had threatened to cramp his getaway. It was a murky issue about copyright infringement – notably the plaintiffs are teasingly referenced in the book in anagram form with McKellen's character Sir Leigh Teabing – and when we spoke to Howard there were whispers that had the court case succeeded, the film's release would be delayed.

Before the result went in Brown's favour, Howard was doing a good job of pretending it wasn't happening: "Not my issue, not my problem. A drag for Dan, horrible, I've been in court cases, they're unpleasant. But I took on a particular role – to direct a film adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code*. It's been pretty nonstop." He, of course, must be ready to open the Cannes Film Festival in a matter of weeks. But, then, isn't that rather like throwing yourself to the lions? The festival is renowned for its snobbishness toward Hollywood, let alone this potty book that dares to encase something of France in its machinations.

"It might, it might not," shrugs Howard. "So many things are possible when it comes to this story. It was flattering and wildly convenient, because the film comes out two days later. This has been a very unique experience: mostly positive, sometimes challenging, but I have no way to predict how it's going to be received in Cannes or anywhere else."

The Da Vinci Code



BEYOND THE PALE

Does Hollywood have it in for albinos? Nick De Semlyen investigates. A bit.

Albinism is a rare genetic condition that deprives you of pigmentation in the eyes, skin and hair. According to Hollywood, it also makes you evil.

"Since 1960, there have been 67 films with the evil albino stereotype," says Mike McGowan, president of the National Organisation for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (NOAH). "And not one sympathetic character to balance it out. NOAH is upset with the trend to always depict albinos as evil, weird, supernatural and altogether unreal."

McGowan cites *Lethal Weapon*, *Foul Play* and *The Matrix Reloaded* as three examples, before denouncing *The Da Vinci Code*'s continuation of the cliché. (2004 was the first year in four decades without an evil albino on the screen.) After discussing the issue with novelist Dan Brown, NOAH wrote to Ron Howard, requesting that psychopathic monk Silas not be depicted with pale skin and red eyes. The result was not quite satisfactory. "The casting director phoned me and asked if NOAH could recommend an actor with albinism to play the part. I declined - it would be hypocritical to facilitate continuing the trend."

NOAH president Mike McGowan on screen albinos

THE DA VINCI CODE

"Silas shoots with accuracy and drives around Paris. Most albinos could do neither because they have uncorrectable low vision."

THE MATRIX RELOADED

"Warner Bros. denied that these characters were albinos; they claimed they were vampires. Yet the studio licensed *Matrix Reloaded* 'Albino Twin' action figures."

COLD MOUNTAIN

"The novel did not describe the sadistic home guardsman Bosie as an albino. The film's director added those features."

POWDER

"This character was the commonly used taunt of children growing up with albinism in the 1990s."

MOBY DICK

"The use of an albino animal in a great literary work widely seen as an insightful allegory does not affect the albinism community."



Jean Reno swears by "key divination" to find the perfect café au lait.

"You know, it's just entertainment. Popular fiction. Just a movie."
Ron Howard

For all the controversy, all the legal tit-for-tat about who copied whose nutty theories about Christendom's origins, *The Da Vinci Code* has undoubtedly tapped a greater neediness in the world. We live in shallow secular times, fattened on the cheap thrills of reality television and gung-ho moviemaking. Does the success of this elaborate novel thick with art history, religious arcana and the Big Man upstairs speak of a hunger for spiritual nourishment? Will *The Da Vinci Code* be the first blockbuster for the soul?

Howard looks aghast - this has been hard enough, now we want to make it transcendent? Then he smiles, the first sign of Richie Cunningham all day.

"There's a theory," he says, keeping a watchful eye on Hans Zimmer, who has patrolled back into view looking for his director. "We have entered

the Age Of Aquarius, predicted to be a time of spiritual re-evaluation and awakening." Zimmer looks dumbstruck. "I heard that from Dan the first time, as an answer to why the book did so well. The world is getting smaller. It's tougher and tougher to be parochial in your thinking. It's harder than ever to be certain, so part of our job as human beings is to keep dreaming."

Dreams, symbols, meanings, sub-texts, conspiracies, anagrams, labyrinthine lawsuits and now the Age Of Aquarius? The non-polarising director raises his hands in surrender. "You know, it's just entertainment," he pleads good-naturedly. "Popular fiction. Just a movie."

Tell that to Brown's faithful millions.

» *The Da Vinci Code* is released on May 18 and will be reviewed next issue.